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Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Office for Project Services

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Country programmes and related matters

Modifications to the procedures for consideration and approval of country programme documentation

Summary

The present document contains proposals for the modification of the structure and content of country programme documents, and of the procedures for their consideration and approval as adopted by the Executive Board in its decisions 1996/6, 1996/45, 2001/11, 2006/36 and 2008/11. The proposed changes respond to the call of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system to simplify and harmonize organization-specific instruments and processes and to reinforce the alignment of country programmes with the strategic plans of organizations. The changes aim to further strengthen national ownership, situating cooperation programmes within national development processes. They will strengthen the commitment of UNDP to the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks, where applicable, and other system-wide coherence approaches, and will allow for systematic tracking of the global contribution to national development results as envisioned in the strategic plan.

Elements of a decision

The Executive Board may wish to (a) endorse the proposed modification to the procedures for the consideration and approval of country programme documentation (DP/2014/8); (b) welcome the continued efforts made by the members of the United Nations Development Group towards further harmonization and streamlining of programming instruments and processes in support of country programmes of cooperation, in line with the recommendation of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system; (c) stress that the programming process for UNDP cooperation should continue to emphasize national ownership; and (d) request that the country programme documents continue to be developed on the basis of national plans and priorities, within the structure of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, where applicable, and of the strategic plan.

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I. Background

1. In its decisions 1996/6, 1996/45, 2001/11, 2006/36 and 2008/11, the Executive Board approved the procedures as well as to the format and content of country programme documents. The decisions affirmed, among other principles, those of national ownership, United Nations system-wide coherence, simplification and harmonization with other United Nations organizations, and Executive Board involvement in the review and approval process.

II. Modification of the format of proposals for country programmes of cooperation and procedures for their consideration and approval

A. Introduction

2. The proposed modifications were prompted by reviews of recent experience with governments and other partners, as well as ongoing consultations with members of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG). The proposals respond to the call made in the quadrennial comprehensive policy review to simplify and harmonize programming instruments and processes across the United Nations funds and programmes.

3. In addition, the standard operating procedures for countries wishing to adopt the 'delivering as one' approach on a voluntary basis, issued by the UNDG in August 2013, encouraged UNDG members to look at ways to simplify the overall programming process. These included the timeline, format and content of documentation for preparing new country programmes. The intention is to fully align with national development plans and the cycles of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, where applicable.

4. The revisions to the procedures and format are proposed in the context of the increasing availability of information on programme strategies, results and lessons learned in each programme context. This includes greater emphasis on strengthening processes for real-time monitoring, which is proving to be important to informing decision-making at all levels. Information on programme results, efficiency and effectiveness can be found in the annual report of the Administrator, assessments of country programme development results, evaluation reports and reviews, thematic reports, and other knowledge-related products. These rapidly expanding data and sources of information can deepen and broaden the review and approval process by members of the Executive Board and other development partners.

B. Modified format for country programme documents

5. The current country programme document is a maximum of seven pages in length (one cover page, four narrative pages and a two-page results and resources framework). The document is accompanied by a fully costed evaluation plan. Country programme documents are shared with the Executive Board together with a report on the assessment of development results or a summary the performance of the previous country programme.

6. The proposed country programme document will comprise a narrative, a first annex containing the results and resources framework, and a second annex containing a costed evaluation plan. The narrative and the first annex will not exceed a combined 6,000 words in length, and within this limit it is expected that the annex containing the results and resources framework will be of approximately four pages in length. This responds to the interest shared by partner governments, members of the Executive Board, and UNDP, to strengthen the management of results of each country programme.

7. To avoid a substantial increase in translation costs caused by the new United Nations Secretariat rules and price scales implemented in 2012, only the narrative part of the country programme document will be translated. The first annex, containing the results and resources framework, and the second annex, containing the costed evaluation plan, will be posted on the Executive Board webpage in the language in which they were prepared (English, French or Spanish).

8. Each narrative will adopt a specific structure, the main elements of which have been modified to be consistent with those of other United Nations organizations, and to facilitate joint analysis and review. Those elements are:

(a) *Programme rationale*: establishing the context and basis for the programme of cooperation drawn from analysis of the country development situation and of lessons learned;

(b) *Programme priorities and partnerships*: summarizing the programme components, outcomes and strategies that will address the critical issues identified in the programme rationale and situation analysis;

(c) *Programme and risk management*: outlining the coordination mechanisms in relation to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and other related national processes and structures that will guarantee results from a risk-informed perspective; and

(d) *Monitoring and evaluation*: identifying the approaches that will be used to improve accountability and learning in the country programme.

III. Modified procedures for consideration and approval of country programme documents by the Executive Board

9. The proposed modified procedures seek to improve and simplify the process for consideration and approval of country programme documents.

10. At present, in accordance with the Executive Board decisions noted above, draft documents containing indicative budgets are presented for consideration and review by the Executive Board at its annual session (which according to recent practice takes place in June). Within six weeks of the close of the Executive Board discussion, the documents are revised to incorporate any changes proposed for the programme by members of the Executive Board, as well as government and other partners, and are posted to the UNDP Executive Board website. Within six weeks of posting, unless written requests are submitted by at least five members of the Executive Board to review the country programme documents at the second regular session (which according to recent practice takes place in September), the documents are then approved on a no-objection basis at that session. Final versions

of the approved documents, incorporating the changes made to the revised country programme documents, are then posted to the UNDP Executive Board website.

11. The modified approach invites the Executive Board to both consider and approve the country programme document, on a no-objection basis, in one session. In keeping with the principle of nationally led development, UNDP proposes that country programme documents be presented at the Executive Board session that is most appropriate in terms of Government and country-level planning and priorities. By combining the current three-step documentation process (draft, revised, and final country programme document) into a one-step process, the proposal offers the potential for substantial savings in time and transaction costs for the relevant governments, Executive Board members and UNDP country, regional and headquarters offices. It also lengthens the time available for all concerned, including Executive Board members, to review and engage on the country programme document before the session. UNDP will continue to consult with partner governments at the country level during the preparation of the country programme document in order to facilitate review when it is formally submitted for Executive Board consideration.

12. The proposal takes into account the fact that both review and approval of the country programme documents by the Executive Board, and follow-up on the recommendations made by the members of the Board, are vital to the country programme process. The drafts would be made available to Members of the Executive Board electronically on the UNDP Executive Board website approximately 12 weeks before the session at which approval is anticipated.

13. Following current practice, comments on the country programme documents would be shared with UNDP in advance of the Executive Board discussion through informal channels, including discussions at the country level, as well as formally at the relevant session of the Executive Board. Delegations would be encouraged to share comments in formal statements if they deem this appropriate. Following recent practice, written statements would be posted to the PaperSmart portal during each session and made available thereafter as electronic archives. All comments and recommendations made by members of the Executive Board would be discussed by the concerned Government and the UNDP country office and incorporated, as appropriate and agreed upon, into the documents operationalizing the United Nations Development Assistance Framework or its equivalents. They will be also agreed by the relevant government and UNDP office, and will be consistent with the approved country programme documents.

14. In addition to the country programme document, members of the Executive Board have access to the UNDP strategic plan and the integrated results and resources framework, as well as a wide range of planning and performance information available online. This information already includes United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks, the annual report of the Administrator, assessments of development results, and other evaluations and reviews. Details of over 6,000 active projects under approved country programmes are available at: http://open.undp.org. This is in line with the UNDP information disclosure policy and with the commitments it has made under the International Aid Transparency Initiative. They complement the emphasis on systematic, continuous and evidence-based results-based management. These efforts are aided by ongoing improvements to technological innovation that support tracking and reporting results and performance, including in real time.